

Convention on the Conservation
of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats

Standing Committee

Recommendation No. 219 (2023) of the Standing Committee, adopted on 5th September 2023 and revised on 1st December 2023¹, on the possible impacts of infrastructure and urbanisation developments particularly Vloa International Airport, on the Vjosa-Narta Protected Area (Albania):

The Standing Committee to the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, acting under the terms of Article 14 of the Convention,

Having regard to the aims of the Convention to conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats;

Recalling that Article 3 of the Convention provides that each Contracting Party shall take steps to promote national policies for the conservation of the habitats of wild flora, wild fauna and natural habitats, with particular attention to endangered and vulnerable species, especially endemic ones, and endangered habitats;

Recalling that Article 4, paragraph 1 of the Convention provides that each Contracting Party shall take appropriate and necessary legislative and administrative measures to ensure the conservation of the habitats of the wild fauna species, especially those listed in Appendix II to the Convention;

Recalling that Article 4, paragraph 2 further stipulates that Contracting Parties, in their planning and development policies, shall have regard to the conservation requirements of the areas protected under the preceding paragraph, so as to avoid or minimise as far as possible any deterioration of such areas;

Recalling that Article 4, paragraph 3 further provides that the Contracting Parties undertake to give special attention to the protection of areas that are of importance for the migratory species specified in Appendices II and III and which are appropriately situated in relation to migration routes, as wintering, staging, feeding, breeding or moulting areas;

Recalling that Article 4, paragraph 4 further states that Contracting Parties undertake to co-ordinate as appropriate their efforts for the protection of the natural habitats referred to in this article when these are situated in frontier areas;

Recalling its Recommendation No. 202 (2018) adopted on 30 November 2018 on the planned hydro-power plant developments on the Vjosa river (Albania);

Recalling that the Vjosa-Narta Protected Area has been officially nominated as a candidate Emerald Network site in 2005, in accordance with national legislation, and as such, it is subject to Recommendation No. 157 (2011, revised in 2019) on the status of candidate Emerald sites and guidelines

¹ The version adopted on 5th September, containing only the first operational paragraph, can be found [here](#).

on the criteria for their nomination, requiring national authorities to “take the necessary protection and conservation measures in order to maintain the ecological characteristics of the candidate Emerald sites” until their full inclusion in the Emerald Network;

Recalling Recommendation No. 208 (2019) on detecting, reporting, assessing and responding to changes in the ecological character of Emerald Network sites;

Considering other relevant international guidelines on birds and airport/biodiversity conflicts such as the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) Guidelines for Waterbird Monitoring, Commission Regulation (EU) No 139/2014 and International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) guidelines, processes and standards;

Recalling Albanian national and regional legislation aiming to protect habitats and species;

Considering that the Vjosa-Narta Protected Area and its surroundings host migratory species, waders and other rare land breeding species protected under the appendices of the Bern Convention, AEWA and Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and aware of the foreseeable ecological impact of the airport project on this unique natural sanctuary;

Taking note of the report of the on-the-spot appraisal jointly held with the AEWA and CMS carried out by an independent expert on 29th August to 2nd September 2022 (document T-PVS/Files(2022)67);

Recommends to the Government of Albania to:

1. Suspend the construction of Vlora International Airport until a new and sufficient Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedure is conducted, as well as a Proper/Appropriate Assessment.
2. Initiate a comprehensive Wildlife Monitoring Programme to investigate, analyse and make available detailed information on the presence and movements of avifauna (between breeding, roosting and feeding sites) and other important species, such as bats, for at least two, but preferably three years, in the complex of habitats around Narta Lagoon - Vjosa Delta – Karavasta Lagoon following, amongst others, the AEWA Guidelines on Waterbird Monitoring, and using modern tools such as bat detectors. Protected breeding land birds and open land sections used by birds of prey must be included in the monitoring, registering the critical habitats for these species. The use of agricultural fields by birds during the breeding, wintering and migration period should also be recorded for sites close to the four candidate airport areas. Include the peripheral agricultural or seminatural zones within the monitoring programme.
3. based on evidence from long-term comprehensive data and the Wildlife Monitoring Programme as described in point 2 of this Recommendation, carefully evaluate, if necessary, the alternative locations for the airport site by:
 - a. Assessing the environmental and safety risks in all alternative locations for the airport;
 - b. Considering the avoidance, minimisation and compensation options within the Mitigation Hierarchy.
4. Based on the results of the Wildlife Monitoring Programme from point 2 of this Recommendation, revise the existing EIA and create a draft Environmental Management Plan and Environmental Safety Management Plan for all alternative sites for the airport, evaluating the risks and safety for humans, birds and other biodiversity. Consideration should be given to other relevant processes and standards, such as Commission Regulation (EU) No 139/2014 and ICAO guidelines, processes and standards.
5. In relation to the aforementioned Wildlife Monitoring Programme for all candidate airport sites, taking into account instruments such as the Commission Regulation (EU) No 139/2014 and ICAO guidelines, processes and standards, organise a tender to attract the best expertise on bird and other wildlife strike prevention in order to maximise the assessment of both the conservation and safety risk.

6. Based on the data obtained by the Wildlife Monitoring Programme, adopt and implement an ecosystem approach, as advocated by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which mainstreams biodiversity into transport infrastructure planning and promotes the conservation and sustainable use of the environment in an equitable way.

7. In order to recognise the terrestrial, water and aerial corridors for wildlife at national level and avoid future infrastructure – biodiversity conflicts, update the National Transport Master Plan in parallel with a National Green Infrastructure Master Plan. To maximise their impact and promote alignment with other European mechanisms, relevant strategies and policies should also be considered when developing these plans, such as the Trans-European Transport Network (TENT), the Trans-European Nature Network (TEN-N) and the EU Green Deal, as well as:

- a. Recommendation No 25 (1991) of the Bern Convention on the conservation of natural areas outside protected areas proper; and
- b. Article 10 of the EU Habitat Directive on ensuring the ecological connectivity and the coherence of the Natura 2000 Network.

8. Start an intensive capacity building programme on sustainable infrastructure development and biodiversity conservation. An international event such as a workshop or conference inviting experts and organisations from other parts of Europe and beyond could be a fundamental starting point.

9. Support the implementation of the idea of the Free European River of Vjosa in cooperation with Greece, considering:

- a. The need to develop the River Basin Management Plan, ideally at cross-border level, including climate change adaptations and biodiversity conservation, in line with legal instruments such as the provisions of the EU Water Framework Directive 2000/60/EC, as applicable.
- b. The initiative to create the Vjosa National Park (IUCN category II) including the Delta of Vjosa and the Narta Lagoon, in relation to the National Plan for Areas of National Importance;
- c. The development of the Local Detailed Development Plan related to the areas of the Delta and Areas of National Importance, with full respect of, and priority toward, biodiversity conservation.

10. Build a deeper cooperation with the full spectrum of stakeholders who can be engaged in an informative, consultative, or collaborative way in infrastructure development projects. In particular, initiate collaborations with the most relevant NGOs, using their expertise to fulfil the needs and obligations for biodiversity conservation in Albania.

11. Following the Proposal of a post-2020 Workplan of the Evaluation on the 2011-2020 Emerald Network Workplan in Albania as part of the Cluster 4 of the West Balkan countries, and taking into account the lack of progress to submit an updated database, as well as the list of “typical” activities for Phase I of the workplan, efforts should be made to:

- a. Develop a pilot project (full project which includes inventories and data collection), in cooperation with relevant NGOs and other stakeholders, for the complex of protected areas of Narta-Vjosa Delta-Karabasta in combination with point 2 of this Recommendation;
- b. Create a first database submission (data collection, data recording and submission);
- c. Use results and data from the proposed pilot project and Wildlife Monitoring Programme to identify key routes used by birds to move between the wetlands, and take these findings into account when drafting the Management Plan for "Nartë-Pishë Poro" protected area and developing the Vjosa River Basin Management Plan in the framework of the designation of the National Park of Vjosa River.